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Orcas at Page's

by Phyllis Reeve

For the first time in more than twenty years, orcas¹ visited Silva Bay on Friday, February 6, 2004. About 11 a.m., I looked out the window at Page's Marina on Gabriola, as I do a hundred times every day and more on sparkling sunny days such as this. Usually, I see river otters, often harbour seals, once or twice a year a sea-lion en route to the log booms at the Harmac Pulp Mill. On May 3, 1991, a grey whale carcass was beached between Silva Bay and Drumbeg Park. But no killer whales.

People on the outer shores of Gabriola Island see killer whales, but not often. Bob Meyer of Silver Blue Fishing Charters, who is out on the water more than just about anyone, sees them only two or three times a year. A pod was sighted near Entrance Island on Christmas Day, 2003. A friend who used to live on Canso Drive, looking towards Vancouver Island, saw them every winter. Sometimes they had young with them, she said, and they came within spitting distance of the cliff. But never into Silva Bay.

Gail Page, whose family came to Silva Bay in 1943, remembers orcas arriving once or twice a year during in her childhood, in the 1950s and 60s. Eight to twelve whales would swim across in front of Vance Island. But not recently.

So I had trouble believing my eyes, and checked through the telescope several times before calling Ted to look. Yes, he agreed, they were whales, a number of them very busy about something between Law Point

and Vance Island, and he pointed to a sea-lion on the point behind the pod. I alerted Tom Upton of High Test Dive Charters, who had come to work on his boat. He went out for a quick, careful look. Then he phoned Graeme Ellis at the Department of Fisheries and Oceans, Pacific Biological Station in Nanaimo, and I phoned the press (the *Gabriola Sounder*). All around the bay neighbours were calling each other.

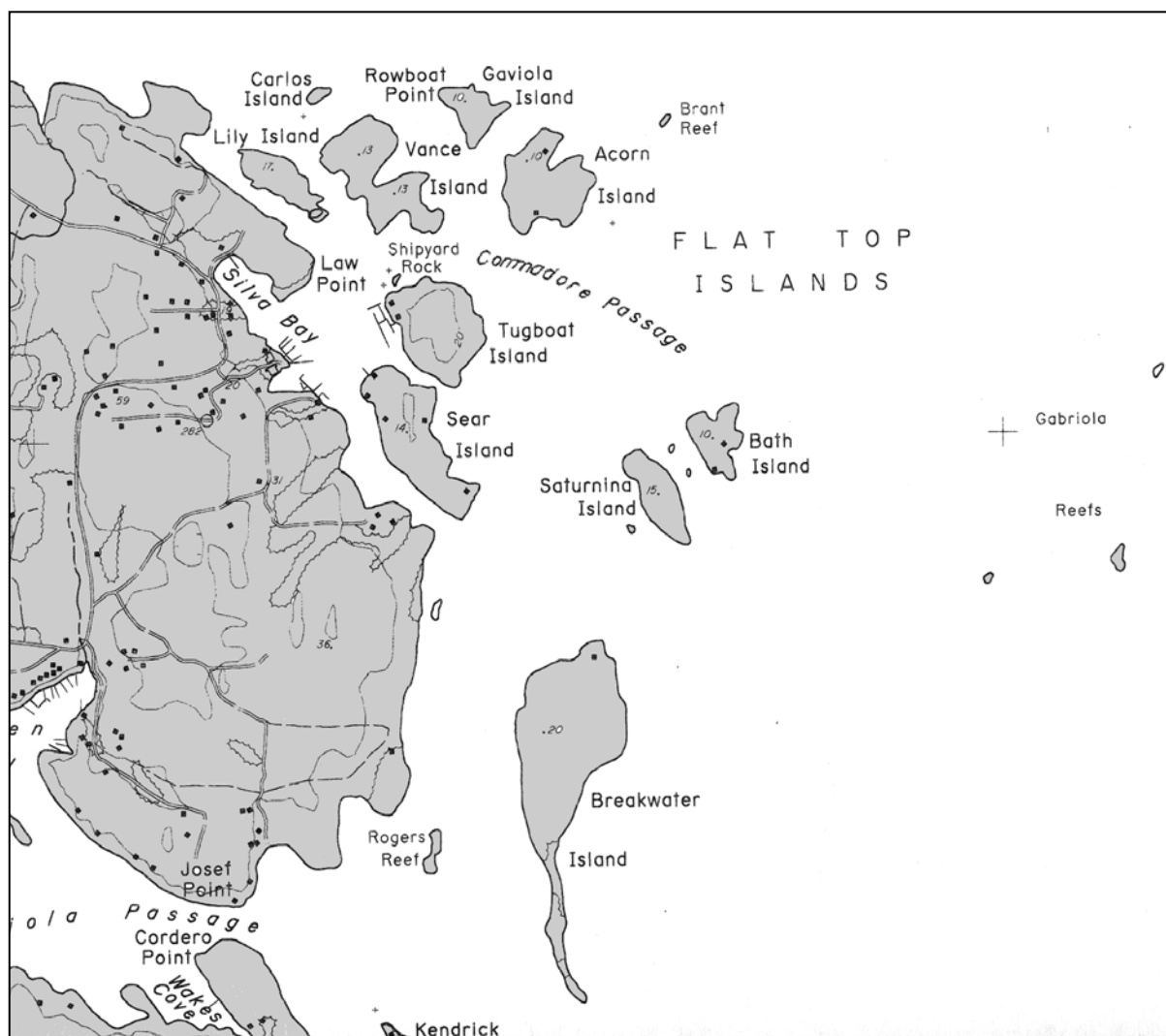
Tom went back in the boat, this time with Ted and several cameras. A few awestruck people in canoes came alongside them. Soon after they returned, Ellis and his colleague John Ford arrived.

Ellis and Ford are co-authors of two important and beautiful books about whales: *Transients: Mammal-Hunting Killer Whales of BC, Washington, and Southeastern Alaska*, and, with Kenneth C. Balcomb from Friday Harbor: *Killer Whales; the Natural History and Genealogy of *Orcinus orca* in British Columbia and Washington State*.² We had the experts on site.

The orcas obligingly stayed for several hours in Silva Bay and just outside, in Commodore Passage between Vance and Tugboat Islands. Graeme Ellis kindly shared his observations with us. The whales had proved to be old acquaintances, recognizable, and distinguishable from one another, by subtle differences in their dorsal fins.

¹ Killer whales, *Orcinus orca*.

² UBC Press 1999 and UBC Press/University of Washington Press, 1994.



Adapted from BC Government digital map 92G.012

"I arrived at the entrance to Silva Bay about an hour after receiving the report from Tom of an extremely active group of killer whales in Silva Bay itself. From his description, it sounded to me that it was most likely a group of transient or mammal-eating killer whales, perhaps attacking a sea-lion or seal. The animals were actively feeding when we arrived, and we observed gulls picking up pieces of blubber that were floating to the surface in the area. The whales continued to feed for the next 2½ hours that we watched

them, and although we were never able to see what it was they were ripping up, it was obviously quite large.

"We did manage to retrieve some bits of flesh which we have sent off for DNA analysis to determine what species it was. All the killer whales present were well known to me, and were all animals that are seen most years in southeast Alaska by colleagues that work there, although they do turn up down here fairly often. They were



Courtesy John Ford

indeed transient type killer whales and there were about 16 in total.

“Some of the calves and juveniles are difficult to identify visually. There were two males, T087 and T097, six mature females, T088, T090, T071, T100, T124, T124B, and the rest were immatures, the offspring of four of the females. As I mentioned, I didn’t actually see the kill, but it is very common for these to be very high energy activities, especially if they are taking on dangerous prey such as a large sea-lion, which would be like attacking a grizzly bear!

“In an attack such as this, they often attempt to disable the prey by striking it with their flukes or ramming it. I have watched sea-lion kills that have taken up to two hours. It is also possible these animals killed something else such as a small whale or even an elephant seal, as anything warm-blooded is definitely on their menu.”

The term “transient” refers to more than the orca travel pattern. Ford, Ellis and others have demonstrated the presence in our waters of two genetically distinct forms of killer whales, who do not associate with each other and lead different lifestyles. “Residents” are fishers, and “transients” are hunters. Our orcas were transients.

Lance Barrett-Lennard at UBC was able to tell us later as a result of his DNA analysis that the whales were indeed feeding on a Steller sea-lion, perhaps the foolhardy sea-lion Ted had noticed at Law Point. Male Stellers can be over three metres long, and have an average weight of half a tonne.

Ellis complimented our local whale-watchers: “During the time John Ford and I spent observing these whales, several boats came out to watch as well, and I must say I



was very impressed with how well they behaved around the animals, giving them lots of room and respect.” Perhaps they had read Bob Meyer’s advice in the *Sounder*, January 22, 2004, cautioning us to treat a whale sighting as a privilege. Or they may have seen the Whale Watching Guidelines in Gabriola-based *WaveLength* Magazine’s Orca Pass Special Issue, August/September 2003.

That Friday afternoon, Tom had one more important boat-trip. The orcas stayed in the area until school was out and seven-year-old Zak Upton went out with his Dad to be introduced to T087, T088, et al.

We hope they come back before he grows up. ♦

Photographs by Ted Reeve